

# Disabled?—Not so as you'd notice it!

J. S. FLETCHER

VISIT A SPORTS club in Doncaster and you will see young people training together at weight lifting, older men enjoying a game of badminton, and in one corner a young girl at her archery practice. Nothing very exciting about that, you may say, and you would be right, except for two things: first, lads of Hatfield borstal (and some of their officers) are behind-the-scene workers at this club; second, the weight lifters, the badminton players and even the girl archer are all disabled . . . for this is the Doncaster Polio Sports Club.

How did all this happen? For the past three years Mr. S. R. Norris, my fellow physical education instructor, half a dozen lads from the borstal and myself have been helping the Doncaster branch of the Polio Fellowship with their swimming sessions. This, begun under the encouragement of Mr. M. P. H. Coombes when he was our governor, consisted of helping the patients to learn to swim, largely

by "being around" especially near the more disabled. Last year, at one of these sessions, we were approached by some of the members to start a sports club. They had no knowledge of any sports which would be suitable for them, no place to operate . . . all they had was a wish to take part in sport of some kind. After discussion they also had the willingness of two P.E.I.'s, to help, and the possibility of using the borstal gymnasium if the governor agreed. By this time the governor was Mr. T. R. Carnegie and, when we discussed our plans with him, he agreed that the gymnasium could be used on a Sunday morning when most of the lads would be at Church. It was decided that members would need a certificate from their doctors and at the same time it was agreed that we, the instructors, must find out as much as possible about the work we were about to undertake. So, we had a place to work, more than likely



*The Club (with the author extreme left, his colleague P. E. I. Norris extreme right)*

a good few members, but our own knowledge needed a boost.

Having visited the spinal injuries unit at Wakefield's famous Pinderfields Hospital, and remembering their sports section, I decided we must seek their advice. As soon as Mr. M. Smart and Mr. B. Gordon, their remedial gymnasts, knew our problems they were delighted to help. During our visit we watched basketball and, as before, I was filled with admiration for the way in which this game was tackled. No doubt many factors come into the rehabilitation of disabled people, but surgery, various kinds of therapy, even psychiatry, all may not be enough for people who suddenly find the use of their legs gone and who

are faced with the prospect of spending the rest of their lives in a wheel chair. Yet here they were, playing basketball, and playing it like professionals.

After more advice, we decided on basketball, badminton, table tennis and weight lifting. When we returned we were a little apprehensive when we considered the physical condition of some of our friends, and decided that unless we could really appreciate their difficulties we would not get anywhere—we decided to learn things as they would have to learn them—in a wheel chair.

Visitors to institutions are usually introduced to P.E.I.'s, and generally they make some good-humoured crack about "muscle

men"; I wonder what some of our visitors to the club thought when they saw two able-bodied muscle men in wheel chairs? Any one who plays basketball will understand our problems if he sees how many baskets out of 10 he can get when sitting on a chair at the free throw line. Or in another sport, have you ever tried to throw a javelin while sitting down? If you practice this, remember also that an able-bodied person in a chair will eventually become the more proficient; then you have some idea how difficult this is for the disabled.

Nevertheless, we got on with it, and in due time we formed a team. We played Pinderfields: the final score was something like 88 against us, four against them, and that included two points they gave us! We realised we were too old and too slow, and so basketball became a relaxing game for us as opposed to a competitive one, but please do not think we gave up everything just because we were too old and too slow for basketball. I am sure the example of Carl Hepple, captain of the Pinderfields team, was an inspiration to our team members. We were all delighted when he was voted paraplegics "Sportsman of the Year". Our own record, possibly not too bad for our first full year, included two first awards at bonda bowls, two firsts in the women's shot, discus and javelin, two seconds in lightweight and heavy-weight weight lifting (120 lb. and

175 lb. press respectively). one certificate for best overall team and eight certificates for wheel chair racing.

We began with patients who were disabled by polio or sclerosis. We now have amputees . . . and after she has had an operation for arthritis we hope to have a blind patient too. Believe it or not, she has not only tried archery but has hit the target too.

Two men with the use of only one arm each are playing billiards and snooker thanks to the ingenuity of our vocational training course instructors, who made a two and a half inch base on which a movable arm is fitted. This serves as the other hand and can be raised or lowered as required.

The Doncaster Round Table came to our aid, introduced to us by our former deputy governor, Mr. J. R. Sandy, and after a mammoth jumble sale gave the club over £80 worth of equipment for badminton and archery. When the Tablers gave us all this we entertained them to an achery contest—and beat them.

Mr. Knowles, our trade assistant carpenter, is another regular Sunday morning helper who has given a lot of time and thought to our problems.

Usually some six lads help us in the gymnasium or at archery on the field. They never fail to be moved by the courage and patience of our members. After all it isn't

every day you have the chance to see a girl "knock and shoot" . . . using only her feet.

We started with eight members, now we have an average of 14 each week. One, with hemiplegia, plays badminton and snooker; this condition follows a stroke and generally this type of patient is not suited to strenuous games of any kind, but if the game is regulated to the patient there is no reason why he should not play a game . . . ours certainly does, and enjoys it. Another, a sclerosis case, could only manage, and with very great effort, to pull a two and a half pound weight on a piece of string along the floor to him as he sat in his wheel chair. Since he began as a member he has progressed so far that he can pull another wheel chair (with a patient in it) and he also does archery using a 28 lb. bow at a 20 yards range. Janet, who only has the use of her legs, finds archery to her taste. She sits, picks the arrows, knocks the bow, draws and fires the bow over 30 to 40 yards . . . all this with the feet only. One of our more recent members, with total amputation of both legs at upper third of the thigh, does

weight lifting and indoor games. Nothing we have been able to do with these people would have been possible without their determination, patience and will power.

Our first amputee, besides being a very good badminton player, is also an excellent swimmer. We haven't taught this man a lot, but he says: "If I miss a Sunday morning I feel awful. I wouldn't miss it for anything".

The emblem of the club, the phoenix, tells the story of this club, a story of "living again".

I am not an expert in this field, like our members I want to learn all I can and we have been helped by all sorts of people, like my colleague, P.E.I. Fryer from Wakefield, and to all of them we are grateful. Perhaps what I've written here may give someone else, somewhere else, an idea about doing something along the same lines for someone else in the same situation.

I'm leaving Hatfield now for Feltham borstal. I hear someone there is interested in a group of handicapped children. Perhaps they will be interested in sport. Who knows?

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